

Open space is a community amenity, and many residents of Alexandria feel passionate about the City's open space areas. They fight to protect the open spaces currently in place and are eager to point out opportunities for improving them. In addition, many residents are often the first to know about new open space opportunities, or potential opportunities that may become available in the future. Moreover, the open space planning process presented the City with an excellent occasion to bring residents together to have a role in planning those areas that contribute significantly to the quality of life in Alexandria.



Park Planning District 1 meeting

A. A STRATEGY FOR COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The community involvement process was designed to accomplish three general goals:

- To engage residents of Alexandria in defining an open space vision for the City
- To encourage residents to think about, and express their views regarding, the appropriate role for, and adequate provision of, open space in the City
- To educate the community with regard to defining open space, and to thinking about ways in which to maximize open space opportunities

A multi-tiered involvement process was used to engage a broad range of key stakeholders, community groups, and residents in the planning process. This process included:

- Interviews with key open space stakeholders to understand their views of current conditions and their ideas for the future. Those interviewed included representatives from:
 - Office of the City Manager
 - Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities
 - Department of Planning and Zoning
 - Transportation and Environmental Services Department
 - Alexandria School Board
 - Alexandria Beautification Commission
 - Alexandria Federation of Civic Associations
 - Environmental Policy Commission
 - Alexandria Historical Restoration and Preservation Commission
 - Historic Alexandria Restoration Commission
 - Alexandria Soccer Association
 - Parker Gray Community
- *Community sessions in each of the three Park Planning Districts to explain the open space planning process, review the existing conditions inventory, and develop preliminary plan goals and visions. These sessions were held in April and May 2001, and were all well attended.*



Park Planning District 1 meeting

- *A citywide Open Space Summit*, a half-day session to refine the vision and develop a conceptual open space plan. Approximately 150 people participated in the Summit event, held in June 2001.

This community involvement strategy allowed the planning team to reach a large and diverse number of residents, and enabled those who participated to have more than one opportunity to express their views on the issues discussed. The ideas to emerge from all of this input have served as the basis for the Open Space Plan.



Park Planning District 2 meeting

B. THE PRELIMINARY VISION

Each of the Planning District meetings began with a presentation of the open space categories defined as part of the planning process, and findings of the inventory of existing conditions for each category. The meeting was then turned over to the community participants present, in the form of small group discussions. The purpose of these discussions was to allow opportunities for residents to think about their open space needs, and to develop ideas that would contribute to an open space vision for their communities.

While those attending each Planning District session focused specifically on the open space needs within their own district, many also addressed broader citywide needs. What was most remarkable about the input received from these meetings was the similarity of goals expressed by participants from all three districts.

The major discussion points noted by participants, comprising the beginning of an open space vision for the City, indicated need for the following (not in any order of priority):

- Achieving a continuous public open space corridor along the Potomac River in Alexandria
- Maximizing open space connections throughout the City through pedestrian-friendly streets, trails and enhanced streetscape corridors. Tied to this concept is the goal to establish Alexandria as a key link in a regional trail system.
- Placing a high priority on protecting and enhancing the City's stream valleys and other natural resource areas. This includes the creation of clean stream channels, "less engineered" stream banks ("re-green all streams"), and using parks as buffers along river and stream banks to the greatest extent possible.
- Retaining as much usable open space as possible within the most rapidly developing areas of the city. Moreover, within these areas, ensure that established design guidelines and maintenance standards are rigorously enforced.
- Maximizing the use and visual quality of all open space parcels — make the most of what we have.
- Protecting our existing parkland.

- Acting quickly to “capture” open space opportunities, as they become available; having the mechanisms in place to allow the City to act rapidly.
- Securing open space easements on key, privately held and institutional open space areas as these represent some of the largest remaining open space parcels in the City.
- Recognizing the value of streets in an urban open space system and enhancing existing streetscapes so they become a secondary park system for the City.
- Maximizing vacant lands as open space opportunities, particularly where they provide changes to link to other open space areas.
- Preserving areas of significant tree cover.
- Seeking opportunities to create additional open space areas in sections of the City where this is most needed (e.g., the west end, and the northeast portion of Old Town)
- Identifying and enforcing all existing public easements; these could provide some important trail linkages and, perhaps, small open space areas.
- Developing easier and more attractive Metro access for pedestrians.
- Minimizing surface parking lots; locating parking underground where possible and using the surface areas as open space opportunities.
- Undergrounding utilities to the maximum extent possible.
- Defining and developing attractive gateways to the City, along streets,

Legend

- Beauty Interchanges
- Pedestrian & Bike Linkage
- Gateways
- Metro Civic Parks
- Vacant Land - Private
- Vacant Land - Public
- Open Space Preservation / New Parks
- Tree Cover Protection
- Slater Lane Plan
- Trails
- Stream Valley Protection & Enhancement
- Streetscapes
- Highway Corridors
- New Development Areas
- Potomac River Waterfront Program
- Cemeteries
- Schools
- Public Open Space
- Institutional Land

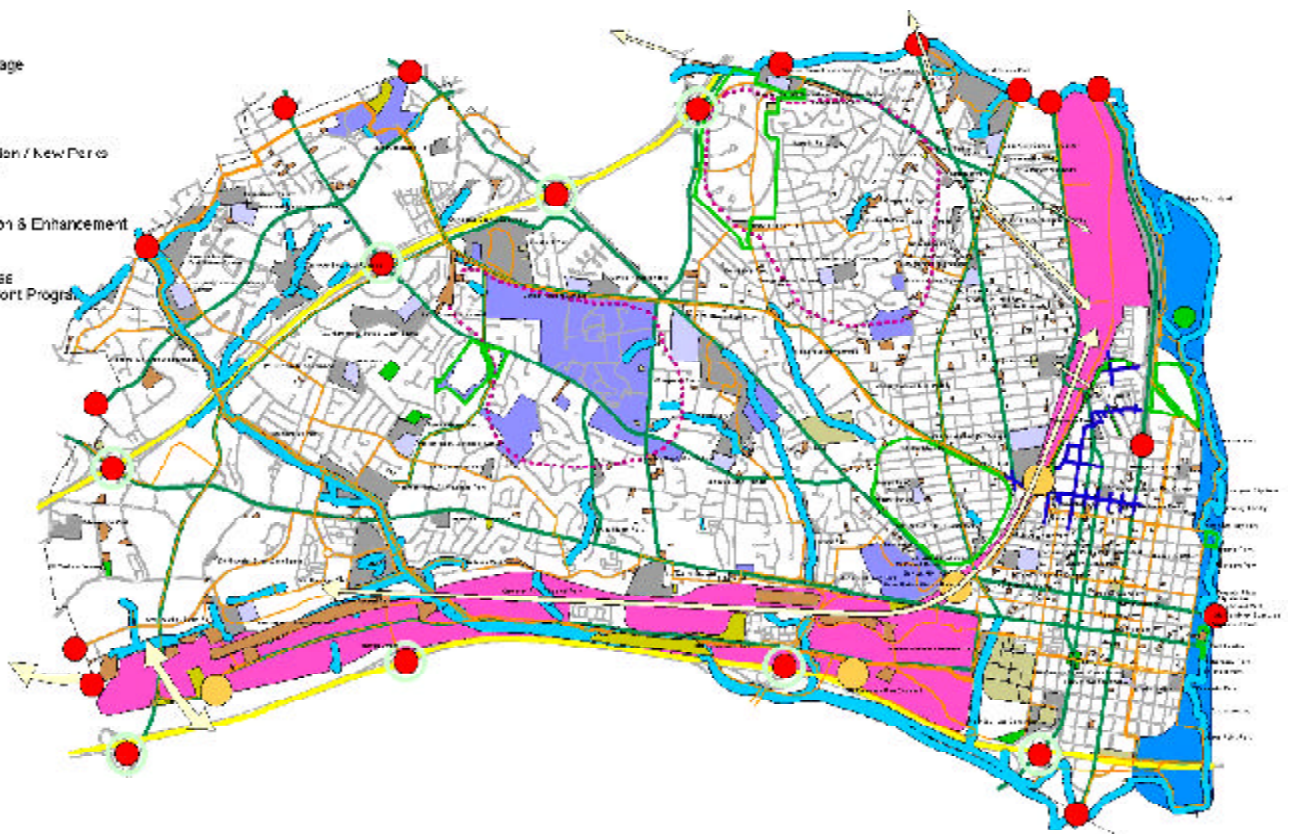


Figure 14: Open Space Vision

highways, and trails.

- Providing additional multipurpose fields.
- Improving the appearance of highway corridors through Alexandria.
- Making better use of open space areas around school properties for habitats, gardens, educational and community opportunities.
- Creating a new zoning classification: a horticultural zone.
- Encouraging scenic easements; identifying valuable properties not currently protected by easements and creating those easements before such sites become developed, or to prevent or limit further development.
- In addition, there were numerous comments regarding the kinds of spaces in residential and commercial developments that should and should not be counted as open space (e.g., parking lots, balconies, roof tops). This issue is, however, being addressed by a separate study of zoning requirements for residential and commercial areas, being prepared under the auspices of the Department of Planning and Zoning. This issue is, therefore, not discussed in the Open Space Plan.

Based on the input provided as a result of the three Planning District meetings, a conceptual Open Space Vision was compiled (see Figure 14). This vision served as the discussion starting point for the Open Space Summit.

C. CITYWIDE OPEN SPACE SUMMIT

Approximately 150 people gathered together on a Saturday in June 2001 to discuss the future of open space in the City of Alexandria. The agenda for this event is provided in the Appendix. In brief, after greetings from Mayor Donley, and remarks from the chairs of the Park and Recreation Commission, the Planning Commission, and the Environmental Policy Commission that placed the open space planning effort in the context of other ongoing efforts in the City, the group listened to a presentation by Peter Harnik (author of *Inside City Parks*) regarding the importance of open space for dense urban cities, such as Alexandria. The consultant team presented the results of the planning process up to that point, and described the conceptual Open Space Vision that was developed following the Planning District meetings. Each of the 15 tables in the room was provided with a copy of the Open Space Vision diagram and participants were asked to work in small group sessions, led by facilitators, to address the following questions:

- The plan presents a wide variety of concepts regarding open space opportunities for Alexandria. Which are the concepts that you feel it will be important for the City to include in its open space plan?
- Are there any concepts that you feel should not be included?
- Can you think of any additional opportunities that we should consider including?
- We have talked about a broad range of open space opportunities. If you were to advise the City on which three to implement first, which would you choose? You have each been given three dots. Please place



Group presentation at the Summit

these on the plan on the three opportunities you believe the City should focus on first.

All groups were given an hour to complete the questions. At the end of that time, a representative from each of the groups was asked to come forward and present its responses. In general, respondents resoundingly supported the overall concepts shown in the Open Space Vision diagram. They did, however, feel that the Open Space Plan should emphasize the following actions:

- Stream valley protection and enhancement throughout the City, including the restoration of stream banks to their natural state and removal/control of invasive plants; continuous public access within stream valley greenways
- Creation of a continuous open space along the Potomac River waterfront
- The creation of significant public open space opportunities in the Eisenhower Avenue corridor and other development areas
- Acquisition of private vacant land for open space use and as scenic easements
- Creation of a linked system of pedestrian and bicycle trails throughout the City to connect parks and neighborhoods, and to link older neighborhoods to new development areas
- Creation of significant, usable public open space areas in the Potomac Yards development area
- Preservation of institutionally-owned open space areas, and improved public access to those areas where possible
- Tree protection and maintenance; possible creation of tree cover protection zones
- Creation of new open space opportunities in the west end and the northeast portion of Old Town
- Enhancement of streetscapes to encourage a positive pedestrian experience ("think of sidewalks as the connecting fabric between open spaces"); conversion of the City's major streets into "greenways;" enhancement of Commonwealth Avenue as a model for this
- Improvements to the areas around the Metro stations, ideally into civic parks
- Research into new major open space opportunities (e.g., the power plant)
- Beautification of the highway interchanges through the City; consideration of highway areas for future decking over, to create new open space areas
- Definition of the City's entrances and beautification of these
- Emphasis on vacant land around schools as potential open space opportunities; balancing the needs for both open space preservation and school growth



Group work was mediated by a landscape architect



Community participants at the Summit

The groups designated three recommendations as the top priorities for immediate action: protection of the City's stream valleys, creation of a continuous

public open space corridor along the Potomac River waterfront, and the creation of connected public open space opportunities in the Eisenhower Corridor.

The information gained from the Summit was used to develop the goals and strategies for the Open Space Plan. These are described in the next chapter of this report.